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SUBJECT: TIGERS 40; HUMANS 1: PROTECTING BOTH SPECIES IN INDIA'S
SUNDARBANS NATIONAL PARK

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11. SUMMARY: India's Sundarbans National Park is famous for its man-eating tigers which on average kill approximately 40 people per year. The tables turn on the protected species when they stray into local villages or are targeted by poachers. ESTHOff visited the Sundarbans and met with forest officials, local villagers, and NGO representatives to discuss the results of ongoing efforts aimed at reducing human-animal conflict. Thanks to nylon fencing and community awareness and organizing efforts, the number of deaths of both species is down substantially. However, experts estimate the overall number of tigers within Sundarbans National Park is far below the official 2004 figure of 274 and a recent incident has revealed government and NGO complacency towards poaching. END SUMMARY

Human Pressure on the Sundarbans

12. The Sundarbans is the largest estuarine mangrove forest on earth, 40 percent of which lies within the territorial confines of India with the other 60 percent in Bangladesh. The Indian Sundarbans is crisscrossed by hundreds of streams and tributaries and hosts a population of approximately 4.1 million living on 54 of 100 islands. Current estimates of the human population density are 876 per sq.km. - over twice India's average of 386 per sq.km. Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) Atanu Raha noted the high population density and stated that growing population pressure was a primary concern for the forest department. Unlike other tiger reserves in India, there are no permanent human inhabitants in the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR), the core area of which is designated as the Sundarban National Park. However, Raha estimates there are now over 1000 villages surrounding the reserve whose villagers make their living from fishing and collecting forest products in and around the STR.

13. Human-animal conflict has serious repercussions in the Sundarbans for both species. Population pressure has reduced traditional tiger habitat and their prey base which has led to fewer tigers. Perhaps more dramatically from the human perspective, the close proximity of people to tigers results in dozens of human deaths each year, many of which come during the legalized April to May honey collection season which sees over 30,000 people enter the protected area on forest service permits. Humans are also attacked while fishing from boats as the Sundarbans tigers are excellent swimmers who raid the small native fishing boats for their catch. Finally, tigers often stray into villages looking for food and come into conflict with villagers. ESTHOff spoke to a villager who confirmed that although illegal and dangerous, his fellow villagers often entered the STR to make their living. He also noted a tiger

had been spotted in the village the week before our visit. PCCF Raha estimates approximately 40 to 50 people die in the Indian Sundarbans annually from tiger attack but noted this number is down substantially from the 1990s when upwards of 200 people were killed by tigers each year.

Protecting Both Species

¶4. The Forest Service has deployed nylon fencing along the borders of the STR that face villages. PCCF Raha readily acknowledged the tensile strength of the fencing was far too low to stop any tiger that wanted to pass through it but that it appeared the fencing acted as a psychological barrier for the tigers. Several forest service personnel described instances where a tiger on one side of the fence chased a human on the other but did not attempt to break through the fence. The fencing blends into the forest reasonably well and only impacts the movement of tigers near villages. Unlike in other tiger reserves in India neither conservationists nor villagers have issued strong objections to the Sundarbans fencing.

¶5. PCCF Raha as well as frontline forest guards described the forest service's pro-active methods of training and raising awareness among villagers regarding the need to conserve not only tigers, but the forest within the STR as well. The Forest Service set-up 10 Forest Protection Committees (FPCs) in villages fringing the STR to educate and involve villagers in various conservation methods. The FPCs focus on providing training on how to deal with a tiger in the village. In the past, the villagers would attack the tiger with homemade weapons and agricultural implements. This often resulted in the death of the tiger as well as great bodily injury and/or death for several villagers. The FPCs were formed to reduce harm to both tigers and humans and have incorporated designated

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responders who call the Forest Service and work to reduce panic within the village until forest guards arrive to tranquilize and remove the tiger. Official figures record that between 1994 and 2001, 25 tigers strayed into villages, leading to the death of 10 tigers at the hands of villagers, while between 2002 and 2006, 20 tigers entered villages with only one killed by villagers. Although experts agree the historical data is highly suspect and greatly underrepresents the presence of tigers in villages, they also note no tigers have been killed in self-defense by villagers in 2008.

¶6. The Government of West Bengal has also created 14 Eco-development committees to foster participatory management and obtain village buy-in for conservation efforts aimed at reducing villagers dependence on the forest. In addition to providing low impact infrastructure such as solar lighting, which not only reduces fuel wood demands but also discourages tigers from entering villages, the Eco-development committees work to foster sustainable agricultural practices including aquaculture and excavation of rain water irrigation channels to increase agricultural production. The eco-development committees have also begun planting mangrove trees in fringe areas in order to reduce the demand for fuel wood within the STR. According to PCCF Raha, these efforts have helped reduce anthropogenic impacts on the tiger reserve which has further reduced human-animal conflict.

Current State of the Sundarbans Tigers

¶7. Despite the efforts of the West Bengal Forest Service, it appears the number of tigers within the STR has been steadily declining. Belinda Wright, Executive Director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India and Emmy award winning wildlife filmmaker, traveled with ESTHoff within the tiger reserve and noted what appeared to be a sharp decrease in the available prey base. After approximately 12 hours spent on narrow waterways deep in the reserve, the sum total of wildlife seen was a handful of deer, a rare gangetic dolphin, and very few birds. This contrasts dramatically with other Indian tiger reserves where there is abundant and varied wildlife on display. The Forest Service has

taken the lack of prey into account and showed ESTHoff a relocation and acclimatization center for non-native deer within the STR. The deer are brought to the center from other habitats within West Bengal in order to determine whether they can survive and reproduce within the Sundarbans. Forest officers were unable to state whether the program had produced any significant results.

18. Ms. Wright has been traveling to the Sundarbans since the 1960s and estimates there are currently no more than 80 to 100 tigers left within the reserve which is substantially less than the widely discredited official 2004 census figure of 274 which was based on analysis of pugmarks. Ms. Wright and Forest Service officials both acknowledged the difficulty of taking an accurate census within the Sundarbans due to resource constraints and the extremely inhospitable nature of the terrain. Ms. Wright did note that the deep mud, heavy brush, forbidding mangroves and the need to move by boat, all of which make census taking difficult, did tend to protect the Sundarbans tigers from poaching. According to both Ms. Wright and forest officials, there had not been a single case of poaching in the Indian Sundarbans in the last fifteen to twenty years.

19. A few days after ESTHoff's visit to the Sundarbans, a dead tiger was found floating in a river with bullet wounds. Forest officials initially believed the tiger was killed in self-defense and was not the target of poachers as it had not been skinned or dismembered. However, media report the West Bengal Criminal Investigations Division later arrested a villager who confessed under interrogation to shooting the tiger. The villager and an accomplice had apparently climbed a tree and shot the tiger with improvised firearms in the hopes of selling its skin and bones in the international illegal wildlife market. However, the tiger somersaulted into an estuary and the poachers lost the carcass. This incident is considered to be an unorganized, non-professional attempt at tiger poaching and has not raised significant concern among forest officials.

110. COMMENT: The efforts of the Forest Service in working to earn village support for conservation efforts has definitely borne fruit in the Forest Protection and Eco-development committee structure. Villagers we spoke with praised the Forest Service and stated the relationship had undergone a sea change whereby villagers no longer viewed the Forest Service as the enemy. However, the recent poaching incident has revealed long-standing government and NGO

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complacency on the issue of poaching in the Sundarbans. END
COMMENT.

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